

The Narrative Role of Dragons in 'Fáfnismál', Beowulf and The Hobbit

In this project, Fáfnir from the Old Norse tale 'Fáfnismál' will be compared to two dragons, the Beowulf Dragon and Smaug. Through comparison, different narrative roles will be laid bare, proving there is more than 'a single, 'medieval, interpretation'¹ of a dragon possible.

Fáfnir

The Sigurðr story exists in many different forms, most of which are found in the two Eddas. Evans outlines the debate surrounding the origin of the Sigurðr story, the most interesting argument being that an older manuscript must have existed, detailing the slaying of Fáfnir more closely, a so called 'Norse Ur-form'². This argument shows the belief amongst critics that dragons were some of the earliest figures in both oral and written narration and that a dragon such as Fáfnir would have been considered deserving of a larger poem dedicated to him. Since no such manuscript exists, 'Fáfnismál' has been chosen for this project in order to analyse Fáfnir's role. Before taking a look at 'Fáfnismál' and Fáfnir, it is interesting to consider the philology behind Fáfnir. The Old Norse word 'ormr'³ is translated with 'serpent', yet is used to describe Fáfnir four times in 'Fáfnismál'. By using this word, the physicality of dragons acquires a very serpentine quality. Especially in relation to the Icelandic Fáfnir this is very interesting, since 'no snakes of any kind [were] to be met with throughout the whole [of Iceland]'⁴. From the outset, a dragon was something outside of the ordinary, a character from a different world. What this implies is that for Icelanders, the dragon was something 'older and more elemental'⁵ than any other character, something both from this earth and far removed. As such, a dragon represents an extraordinary challenge to young Sigurðr, the overcoming of which grants him a high status amongst Germanic heroes. 'ormr' also calls to mind a 'worm', used for both Beowulf's Dragon and Smaug, which has connotations of both life and death⁶. In fighting Fáfnir, Sigurðr will die, in the sense that he will be born a hero and abandon the subservient boy he is before. As such, the dragon represents a kind of passageway between two different states of being for Sigurðr.

However, Fáfnir is also given a weakness. Although he is called 'dreki' in Völsunga Saga, Fáfnir misses a characteristic possibly crucial to a dragon: Fáfnir cannot fly. Instead he 'skreið', (ON skriða, 'to slide'). Despite being elemental, Fáfnir is earthbound. An explanation could be his Dwarvish origin and subsequent metamorphosis upon taking control of the hoard. This humaneness is keeping Fáfnir, quite literally, grounded, allowing him to remember his own life and thereby connect with Sigurðr. There are early parallels between the dragon and his slayer here, that intensify as the narrative progresses. This weakness allows Sigurðr to climb into a pit and stab him in the

¹ R.E. Cutrer, 'The Wilderness of Dragons: the reception of dragons in 13th C. Iceland' (University of Iceland Master Thesis: Skemman, 2012) p. 4

² J. Evans, "'As Rare As They Are Dire": Old Norse Dragons, Beowulf and the Deutsche Mythology' The Shadow-Walkers: Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous, ed. Tom Shippey (Temple: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005) p. 233

³ Andy Orchard, 'Fafnismál' The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore (London: Penguin Group, 2011) stanza 19, 26, 28

⁴ Gunnar Karlsson. [The History of Iceland](#) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) p.173

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics' Proceedings of the British Academy 22 (1936) p. 276

⁶ A different connotation of the worm will be explored in relation to Beowulf's Dragon.

heart, metaphorically '[passing] through this creature to be born a new man'⁷. Again, the dragon as a rite of passage is linked to the idea of new life. Interestingly, as far as a fight or slaying goes, there isn't much of either since the mortal wound is dealt in the introduction. Instead we get a flyting, 'a stylized battle of words which typically either precedes or replaces physical violence in Old Norse

narratives'⁸. A taunting begins on both sides, Fáfnir insulting Sigurðr's masculinity by calling him a 'sveinn' (ON 'boy' st.1) and Sigurðr provoking Fáfnir by calling in doubt his wisdom through repeated questions, 'Segðu mér Fáfnir' (ON. 'Tell me Fáfnir' st. 12, 14'). At danger here is Sigurðr's reputation rather than his life for which Sigurðr has to put up a "real" fight, because he 'is concerned

[primarily] with the preservation of his reputation'⁹. Sigurðr has to show that in his new state as a hero, he has the mental wits to keep up with his foes and see through their lists. Because of Fáfnir's control over most of the flyting, there is a didactic undertone to it, as if the wisdom of the dragon now also belongs to his slayer, alongside his treasure. Similar "battles" are found throughout the Poetic Edda, for example 'Vafthruthnismal' and 'Grimnismal', in which possession of wisdom is crucial to survival. Part of the initiation into both manhood and strength, therefore, is the transference of characteristics from Fáfnir to Sigurðr. This is done both in the flyting when Fáfnir infuses Sigurðr with distrust for Regin and through the intake of Fáfnir's blood and heart by Sigurðr, allowing him to understand animals. What is important about the latter is that Sigurðr is becoming part of that elemental realm where he is both human and animal. This is foreshadowed when he calls himself a 'dýr' ('beast', F. st. 2) and is emphasized in the end when Sigurðr takes the 'ægishjálmr' (ON 'helmet of dread' p. 168). Fáfnir considered himself indestructible with this helmet yet was defeated. By taking on Fáfnir's qualities, Sigurðr also accepts his fate and is killed at the behest of a family member. This shows how crucial a dragon is not only as a rite of passage but also as a connection between a hero's beginning and end. This is made clearer by the Sigurðr carving from Ramsund, Sweden, below.

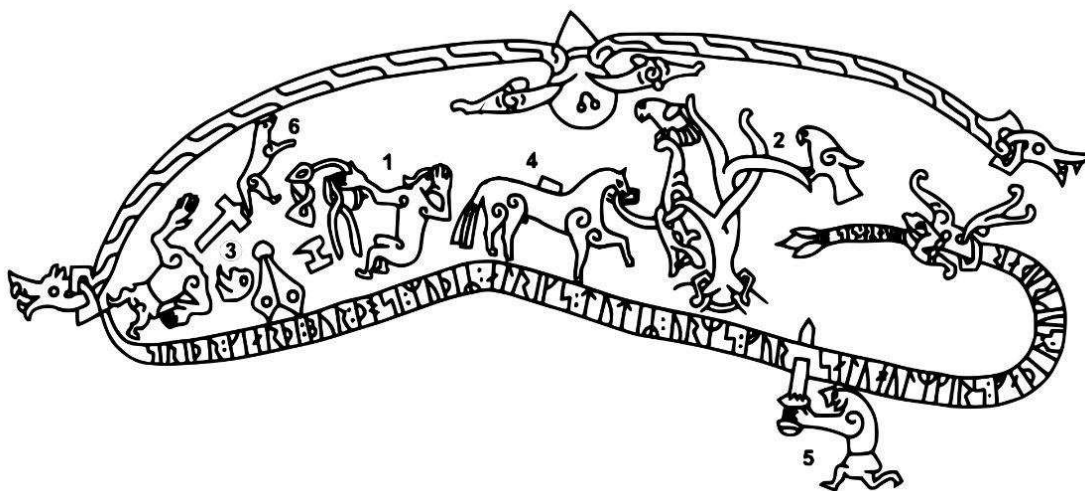


Figure 1: Ramsund carving, Henrik Schück's 'Två Sigurdsristningar', Fornvännen (Journal of Swedish Antiquarian Research, 1923), p. 258

Although the carving 'is not the [exact] illustration of a literary text'¹⁰, it represents the key aspects

⁷ Jan De Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*. Trans. B.J. Timmer. Oxford University Press, London: 1959. p. 222

⁸ Joyce Lionarons, *The Medieval Dragon*, (Middlesex, Harislik Press, 1998) p. 65

⁹ Brian O. Murdoch, *The Germanic Hero: Politics & Pragmatism in Early Medieval Poetry* (London: Hambledon Press, 1996) p. 5

¹⁰ Klaus Düwel, 'On the Sigurd Representations in Great Britain and Scandinavia', *Languages and Cultures: Studies in*

of 'Fafnismál'. Morphy argued that in '[n]ordic animal ornamentation... [the animal's] significance is embedded in the form of artistic expression.'¹¹ When applying this theory to the illustration, Fáfnir's role is illuminated. Fáfnir is not only Sigurðr's initiation into a heroic life, but also a catalyst for what leads to his end. Fáfnir warns twice that 'þér verða þeir baugar at bana' (ON 'those rings will deal you your death' St. 9, 20) and death comes to Sigurðr as a 'direct consequence' of his actions¹². His early encounter with the dragon forms a red thread which can be followed through every poem Sigurðr appears in and makes them come full circle, as is expressed in the carving. What 'Fafnismál' shows is that, as Randel Helms states, 'there are no heroes...unless there be dragons as well'¹³. Although Fáfnir is sometimes considered without importance to the larger story of the Völsungs, his presence sets Sigurðr on the path that creates the other tales. A dragon's appearance at the beginning of a narrative creates an echo throughout the life of his slayer. Fáfnir's presence remains to such an extent that an artist decided to show him as framing and containing the narrative. From a dragon that influences a narrative from the very beginning to a dragon that doesn't appear until the end.

The Beowulf Dragon

The Dragon¹⁴ in the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf, written between the 8th and 11th century, is one of the first depictions of a dragon and its slayer in English literature. Some critics, such as Bonjour, argue that 'to the average [Anglo-Saxon] man, a dragon was no figment but a monster real enough... not normally expected to take on a symbolic significance'¹⁵. Evidence for this apparent prevalence of dragons in Anglo-Saxon society are examples from The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle where 'fiery dragons were seen flying in the air'¹⁶. However, these phrases show dragons as portents of danger and change and it is in that light that Anglo-Saxon dragons should be seen. Also important is the idea of the 'continual shadow of fate, death and doom'¹⁷ which Margaret Bush sees hanging over many Anglo-Saxon narratives. Tolkien summarised it in a sentence, 'lif is laene' ('life is fleeting'¹⁸), capturing the poem's tone at the Dragon's introduction. Beowulf knows that the presence of a dragon means 'ende gebidan' ('the end of his days', B. l. 2342/3), enforcing the idea that a dragon was a symbol of destruction and finality. The Beowulf poet wrote in hindsight about a period already passed and infused his writing with a sense of nostalgia to the old times and his

Honor of Edgar C. Polomé ed. Mohammad Ali Jazayery, Edgar C. Polomé, Werner Winter (Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton: 1988) p. 134

¹¹ Howard Morphy 'The anthropology of art' Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology. Ed. (T. Ingold. Routledge, New York: 1999) p. 659

¹² J. Evans, "As Rare As They Are Dire", p. 233

¹³ Randel Helms, Tolkien's World (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) p. 13

¹⁴ The Dragon is given no name, therefore he will be referred to with a capital D to differentiate him from the species.

¹⁵ Adrien Bonjour, 'Monsters Crouching and Critics Rampant: Or the Beowulf Dragon Debated', PMLA, Vol 68, No. 1 (March, 1953) p.306

¹⁶ Anonymous, 'Year 793', The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, (Britannia Internet Magazine, LLC, 1997): accessed on 01/01/2014

¹⁷ Margaret Bush, "'Just A Fool's Hope": Tolkien's Eucatastrophe as the Paradigm of Christian Hope', p. 14

¹⁸ J. Evans, "As Rare As They Are Dire", p. 261

character with a knowledge of an impending end. A sense of doom is also part of this, watching one time pass in favour of another. The dragon isn't just a dragon, he is also a character of a bygone age, one who has to be eradicated besides Grendel, Grendel's Mother and even Beowulf in order for a new kind of mythology, Christianity, to take hold.

The presence of the Dragon, unlike with Sigurðr, therefore becomes a climax rather than an introduction. In order to discover more about the Dragon's purpose, it is again useful to look at the descriptors used for the Dragon. Similarly to Fáfnir, the Dragon is referred to as a 'wurm'¹⁹, again bringing up the image of underground creatures crawling in the dark. A worm fulfils a positive role in its ecosystem and is crucial to its development, which is, in some sense, also true for the dragon except that his role is much more negative. Besides a worm, the Dragon is also described as a 'draca' (B. l.2211), an honour never extended to Fafnir. The word 'draca' is not indigenous to the English language but came to the Anglo-Saxons, through Latin, from the Greek language. The noun 'δράκων' comes from the verb 'δερκομαί' which means 'to see clearly', which presents the dragon with a very different role from a rite of passage. Although this is usually interpreted as dragons watching over their gold, leading to the assertion that 'gold-hoarding [is] a necessary condition'²⁰, it is also interesting to extend the gaze of the dragon onto more than just his gold, namely to the society in which he finds himself when he crawls out of his den. He is a watcher and observer, waiting on the fringes, looming like 'the nightmarish shadow side of society, the ruthless elements that are normally repressed'²¹. He is, similarly to Fáfnir, an elemental creature, which is enforced by the frequent mentions of his underground cave. Yet although some argue that the Dragon can be 'identified with the nameless "last survivor"' who buried his treasure underground, the text provides evidence that 'the literary equation [of the two] is impossible'²². As such, the Dragon misses the human connection to Beowulf that existed between Sigurðr and Fáfnir. This distinction keeps the Dragon distinctly within the realm of the supernatural, allowing him to be 'an impersonal, amoral'²³ evil, unlike Beowulf's previous challenges in the forms of Grendel and his Mother which were more personal, through which he acquired his hero credentials. Rather than just a creature, the Dragon here represents the failing of the current society and the impending changing of the tide.

When the Dragon rises, Beowulf has reached old age and become a respected king, responsible not only for himself but also for his people. It is therefore significant that the Dragon is awoken not by a warrior looking to claim hero-status, but by a 'feascaeftum men' ('wretched man', B. l. 2285) who steals in order to appease his own master. A good Anglo-Saxon king is supposed to share his wealth amongst his people and it is the dragon who's hoard 'keeps wealth from circulating'²⁴. The fact that

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Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf – A New Verse Translation (Bilingual Edition)* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000) l. 2287

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R.E. Cutrer, 'The Wilderness of Dragons' p. 7

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Kathryn Hume, 'From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature' *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (Winter, 1980) p. 13

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G.V. Smithers, 'The Making of Beowulf' Inaugural Lecture delivered on 18 May, 1961 (Durham: University of Durham, 1961) p.11

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Jonathan Evans, "As Rare As They Are Dire", p. 260

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T.M. Gang, 'Approaches to Beowulf', *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 3., No. 9 (Jan., 1952) p. 6

²⁵

Calvert Watkins, *How To Kill a Dragon* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1995) p. 300

Beowulf's people have to steal shows he is 'unable to exert control and leaves his people to suffer', meaning that Beowulf has failed as a king. As such, the Dragon is a punishment and 'a metaphorical

elaboration of civil disorder'²⁷ which threatens to destroy everything Beowulf has worked for. This destruction caused by the Dragon is described in great detail, chief amongst which is the destruction of Beowulf's own hall, the 'bolda sēlest' ('the best of buildings' B. 2326). By eradicating his throne room, the Dragon symbolically takes away Beowulf's right to rule after he has failed to provide for his people. Unlike in 'Fáfnismál', there is a real battle between Beowulf and the Dragon which is one of the most descriptive passages in the poem. Rather than the actual battle, however, it is the consequences that shed light on the nature of the Dragon. As a portent of change and a punishment for Beowulf, the Dragon comes to bring an end to the kingdom of the Geats. Although it may seem as if he hasn't, since Wiglaf is presented as Beowulf's replacement, the mention of the upcoming war with the surrounding tribes shows that with the end of Beowulf, the end of the Geats has also

come. This presents the Dragon as 'an instrument of fate'²⁸ that brings an end to an era and people. From this dragon we move to another, burdened with a different role.

Smaug the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities

Smaug is the historical culmination of both Fáfnir and the Beowulf Dragon and plays a very interesting role in the narrative of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*²⁹. In the chronology of Tolkien's work, Smaug is the heir to other dragons such as Glaurung, Ancalagon and Scatha. Interestingly, these dragons all adopted characteristics from Fáfnir and the Beowulf Dragon: Glaurung crawls on four legs, Ancalagon can fly and Scatha guards a cursed hoard. Similarly, Smaug is an amalgamation of dragon characteristics. To Ruth Stein, he represents a 'return...to the ferocious,

awesome beasts'³⁰ of mythology, far removed from the narratively simpler dragons from the courtly period. The etymologies behind 'dragon' and 'worm' come together here to create a dragon that is both animalistic in its malice and cunning in its intelligence. Similarly to Fáfnir, the fact that Smaug is a sentient being and can speak, allows more insight into his character, which opens up a third narrative role for the dragon. Through speaking, Smaug, as Jakobsson states, 'has moved...into the

other category, the monster as our double'³¹. Just like Fáfnir, through engaging with different characters, he enriches the readers understanding of the characters, either by foreshadowing their fate or by mirroring their characteristics. Although Tolkien has an established dragon in his tale, the question of its slayer, the hero, is more difficult to answer. Throughout *The Hobbit*, Tolkien makes references to 'the problem of heroes and heroics'³² and this problem is emphasized when Smaug is introduced.

The first character to encounter and deal with Smaug is Bilbo, the protagonist of *The Hobbit*. Bilbo

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Theodore M. Andersson, 'The Thief in Beowulf', *Speculum*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Jul., 1984) p. 507

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T.M. Andersson, 'The Thief in Beowulf', p. 507

²⁸

A. Bonjour, 'Monsters Crouching and Critics Rampant', p. 311

²⁹

Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Hobbit* (UK: Harper Collins, 2009)

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Ruth M. Stein, 'The Changing Styles in Dragons – from Fáfnir to Smaug' *Elementary English* Col. 45, No. 2 (Feb., 1986) p. 181

³¹

Ármann Jakobsson, 'Talk to the Dragon: Tolkien as Translator', *Tolkien Studies*, Vol. 6 (2009) p. 30

³²

C.W. Sullivan III, 'Tolkien the Bard: His Tale Grew in the Telling' in J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-Earth eds. George Clark and Daniel Timmons (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000) p. 18

engages him in a flyting, similarly to 'Fáfnismál', where he engages Smaug in a series of riddles concerning his identity, which Tolkien states is 'of course is the way to talk to dragons' since '[n]o dragon can resist the fascination of riddling talk' (H. p.134). Some critics have argued that this

game of riddling reduces Smaug to 'a story-book dragon'³³ yet the clear parallels between this scene and the one in 'Fáfnismál' show that Bilbo and Smaug are here engaged in a serious battle, which ends in Bilbo's defeat when he gives away not only the number of his companions but also their affiliation with Laketown. Although Bilbo is initially 'pierced with...the desire of the dwarves' (H. p.130) for gold, it is only temporary and too out of character to become a permanent change. Bilbo

is a creature of comfort, much more similar to 'the fairy tale youth'³⁴ who gets to return home at the end of his tale, relatively fixed in his character, if matured, than to Beowulf. He is no hero, the way Beowulf or Sigurðr were, because his heart's desire is far removed from claiming treasure or renown, and as such he cannot slay Smaug because it would 'scarcely [suit] the character of the hobbit'³⁵. Smaug is actually slain by Bard yet here Tolkien once again grasps his chance to question the nature of heroes by aid of the dragon. Bard cannot defeat this dragon on his own,

because 'all-by-himself acts don't slay dragons'³⁶ and without the aid of Bilbo and the Old Thrush, he would never have slain Smaug. He may be a more typical hero figure, but he simultaneously also represents how heroes come to their end. The same way Beowulf failed in defeating the Dragon, so Bard fails to defeat Smaug on his own. Although his story follows its natural course with him becoming the leader of his people, he doesn't achieve the same status as previous heroes.

For both of the previous two characters, Smaug presents a didactic experience from which they grow but are not forever altered. There is one character in the novel, however, for whom Smaug functions as 'a symbolic mirror of the monstrous transformations wrought...through the effects of

avarice'³⁷ and that is Thorin Oakenshield. In one of his letters, Tolkien said that Beowulf was

'among [his] most valued sources'³⁸ and he uses his own work as a way of criticizing the narrative of the poem. He disapproved of Beowulf's motivations, largely greed, to seek out the Dragon and decided that in *The Hobbit*, he would emphasize the fall of grace that came with avarice. Thorin's royal family tree is infused with 'dragon-sickness' (H. p.182), a greed so enormous it brings Smaug to Erebor and destruction to their people. From the very beginning, Thorin and Smaug are linked with each other, the latter constantly reflecting the inner workings of the first. In the newly released

film, 'The Desolation of Smaug'³⁹, the director made the choice to allow the Dwarves to try and defeat Smaug on their own. The failure of this not only shows that 'dwarves are not heroes' (H. p.128), but also that Thorin is incapable of destroying greed because he himself is consumed by it. This duality ultimately leads to the death of both Smaug and Thorin, both refusing to relinquish their claim upon the gold. Although they never meet in battle, they bring death to each other and thereby themselves.

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John S. Ryan, *Tolkien: Cult or Culture* (USA: University Press of New England, 1969) p. 145

34

James L. Hodge, 'The Heroic Profile of Bilbo Baggins', *Florilegium* Vol. 8 (1986) p. 212

35

Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977) p. 179

36

Jonathan A. Glenn, 'To Translate a Hero: The Hobbit as Beowulf Retold' *PAPA*, Vol. 17 (1991) p. 24

37

Evans, "As Rare As They Are Dire", p. 209

38

Jonathan R.R. Tolkien 'Letter 25', *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981) p. 39

39

The Desolation of Smaug. Directed by Peter JACKSON, USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2013

Each author used his dragon for a different purpose. As the most recent, Smaug not only mirrors

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characters within the novel but is also as a 'criticism [on the] greed and self-interest' Tolkien saw reflected in the world. Especially now, where avarice has gotten its claws into many people, dragons once again rise as multi-faceted narrative possibilities. Its presence is not restricted to one, dogmatic purpose but both creates and destroys opportunities, opens and closes narrative doors and allows the readers to reflect upon themselves. Whereas Fáfnir represents the chance of a new and different life, both the Beowulf Dragon and Smaug are signs of a changing and corrupt time. As heroes start to fail, the dragons become more destructive. It can only be hoped that the next character to be faced with a dragon will once more manage to become a hero.

Wordcount: 3832

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